Suddenly, Malaysia has a new prime minister

Muhyiddin Yassin, Malaysia's new prime minister, was appointed by Malaysia's king. [Photo: US Embassy KL; CEphoto/Uwe Aranas]

Malaysia appointed a new leader, but many citizens are unhappy about it. ANNABELLE LIANG reports.

February 29 was a memorable day for Malaysia. On that day, Malaysia's king, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, appointed a new prime minister. Muhyiddin Yassin was **sworn in** the very next day.

The development was a surprise to Malaysians. They had expected their previous prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, to stay in the role for a while. Dr Mahathir, 94, was appointed Malaysia's prime minister in 2018. He was already familiar with the role, as he had served as prime minister for more than 20 years, from 1981 to 2003. He returned to power through a general election.

A general election must be held in Malaysia at least once every five years. This is important because it allows citizens to choose the leaders of their country. The minimum age to vote in Malaysia is 18. (In Singapore, it is 21.) Each citizen gets to cast one vote for the **candidate** she supports.

Citizens usually decide who to vote for based on factors such as the candidates' values, experience, and political beliefs. The candidate who has the most votes in each area becomes a Member of Parliament. Members of Parliament are like group leaders. They

represent a group of citizens in Parliament, raise their concerns, and find ways to make life better.

Working together

It is difficult to win an election alone. So, most hopeful Members of Parliament join a political party. In Malaysia, the political party to beat at the last election was Barisan Nasional. It had won enough parliamentary seats to form Malaysia's government for 60 years.

Dr Mahathir changed that. He reunited with a politician who was jailed when Dr Mahathir was prime minister. Then, he convinced four political parties to join forces to form a new party named Pakatan Harapan.

In Malaysia, a political party needs to win at least 112 out of 222 parliamentary seats to form a government. Pakatan Harapan won 121 seats, and Dr Mahathir was chosen to lead the government as prime minister.

Dr Mahathir (left) was the former Prime Minister. Anwar Ibrahim (right) was originally supposed to take over from him. [Photo: Chatham House; Udey Ismail]

However, there were strong personalities who clashed in Pakatan Harapan, including Dr Mahathir and a former **foe**. The party also had to tackle issues that Malaysians were unhappy with.

"We have economic growth, but wages have not caught up with the cost of living, particularly among the Malay population, particularly among the young," said Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research.

"The economy is not generating enough jobs that pay well. That was the challenge the coalition faced because when they entered government, they found that most of the cupboards were bare, and that they had enormous **debts** that they had to deal with," Mr Suffian told the *BBC*.

Falling apart

Mr Muhyiddin, Malaysia's current prime minister, was part of Pakatan Harapan. He was the President of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party — more commonly known as Bersatu — when Dr Mahathir was its Chairman.

Mr Muhyiddin has years of experience under his belt. He was even appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 2009, but he was sacked six years later for criticising the government.

Tensions within the new party caused Mr Muhyiddin to quit Pakatan Harapan. He and other members put pressure on Dr Mahathir to form a pact with other political parties. But, Dr Mahathir did not give in to this and resigned as Prime Minister.

"I resigned because I did not want power and the position to be the be all and end all of my intentions," he said. "To me, power and position are a means to an end... And our objective is the good of the country."

As more Members of Parliament left the party, the government collapsed. Malaysia's king named Dr Mahathir as **interim** prime minister soon after.

Surprise appointment

Instead of holding another election, the king decided to choose the next prime minister himself. The king then interviewed all Members of Parliament, to find out whom they supported as prime minister. That was how Mr Muhyiddin got the top job.

Still, many Malaysians are unhappy with how this came to be. A small group of protestors gathered in Kuala Lumpur. The hashtag #NotMyPM also trended on Twitter.

"A government not voted in by its own citizens. One day, the **rakyat** will rise," said Sharifah Hani Yasmin.

"As a Malaysian, I never voted for a corrupt government but instead voted for change. I stand by the government I voted for in #GE14," said Aaron Denison. Mr Denison was referring to the 2018 general election that was Malaysia's fourteenth.

Appeal for support

In his first address as Prime Minister, Mr Muhyiddin promised to serve everyone, no matter their ethnicity or occupation.

"I urge you to support me to undertake this huge responsibility entrusted to me," he said. "Give me a chance to utilise my 40 years of experience in politics and government. I give you my heart and soul."

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VOCAB BUILDER
sworn in (say "**sw**orn **in**"; verb) = formally given a new official duty.
candidates (say "**kan**-di-deyts"; noun) = people who are put up for election.
foe (say "fo"; noun) = enemy.
debt (say "det"; noun) = a sum of money that is owed.
interim (say "**in**-te-rim"; adjective) = temporary.
rakyat (say "**rak**-yat"; noun) = Malay word for ordinary people that form the masses.